

The Elastic House

By

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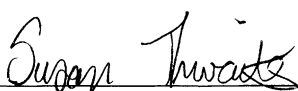
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### *Abstract*

On a hot February afternoon, on an almost deserted beach on the southeast coast of Australia, a baby girl is born.

Witnesses to her birth are the large, extended family that surrounds her: sisters and brothers, cousins, aunts, uncles and her father, as well as a vacant block of land that hums.

It is 1961 and Rose has entered the world in a hurry.

This place, the sea, the bush and the quarter acre block up on the hill are special to her. For here, in the soon-to-be-built Elastic House, the memories of her coming life, along with those of her family's shall be kept.

Rose has been born with a gift of hearing the details of her surroundings, the whispers of others. She listens to their pain and joy, and becomes a keeper of stories. Together with the Elastic House she stores these memories until it is time they are forgotten.

The writing of *The Elastic House*  
(Exegesis)

When I applied to do the Masters course at UTS, I did so with a feature length screenplay in mind. My background is in film, where I work as a camera operator and teacher.

The structure of the course has changed since I began in the middle of 2002, and they are now looking at screenplays, in the form of adaptations, in the writing workshops. But when I started, the MA Research Seminars concentrated on novels, and I found myself in a class where every student was writing fiction.

Not feeling comfortable workshopping sections of a screenplay to a room full of novelists, I began to write a few short stories about the memories I had of a house my extended family had for forty years. We had only recently sold the house and I was processing the loss of it, the land, the sea and of course the actual house.

The first story I wrote was from my point of view, as an adult. It was about walking into the house and being hit by a memory of me as a four-year-old. I wrote the memory and then, at the end of the piece, I mentioned that I feel a child's hand in mine, and look down to see my two-year-old daughter next to me. She struggles with her own ghosts, I wrote, so I must come back from my childhood, to assist her with hers.

It was this short story that gave me the idea for the novel, that the house, which was only ever used by family members, was a place where memories were stored. I found through writing my memories of each summer visit to the house, I was seeing myself, and my mother, cousins, siblings, etc as characters in different

parts of history. I liked the idea that at each visit another year had gone by in our ‘normal’ city lives, but our return to this unchanged house of old furniture and sagging beds, saw nothing change. These beds we had slept in since we were born, and would sleep in, one time or another, as a toddler, a teenager, a young adult, and a parent. One day tucking our own children into a bed we remember being tucked into ourselves.

Kate Atkinson’s novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, was a great influence on me, and it was the structure of her book that made me want to try and write my memories and the stories I had learned of my family into a novel. I loved the way Atkinson managed to write in the first person, present tense from her character Ruby’s conception, to her as a forty year old woman, as well as present the history of Ruby’s mother and grandmother and their stories, in third person, past tense. The reader not only follows the main narrative of Ruby’s life growing up, but also is given the opportunity of slipping back in time to follow the narratives of Ruby’s mother and grandmother.

One of the things I found interesting in Atkinson’s novel was the way the author deals with time. For example, we are introduced to Ruby’s mother Bunty, on the first page of the novel having sex with Ruby’s father, as Ruby is conceived. Later, in one of the many footnotes that reveal the past narratives, we meet Bunty again, this time as a child herself, with her own mother, Nell, who is as old as Bunty is at the beginning of the novel. I found slipping back and forth in time, and visiting Bunty as a young woman, before marriage and children have turned her bitter, an interesting device that helped me read more into her character as Ruby’s mother.

In *The Elastic House*, I wanted to start with Rose being born on the beach near the vacant block that soon would have the house on it. At first I began, as Atkinson does, in the first person. But to capture the voice of a child (or a foetus in this case)

was very difficult, and I found it hard to try and make the implausible convincing. I re-read a number of books whose authors had managed to mix that childlike innocence and wonder with an adult perspective, so that adult readers were able to connect with the character, among them *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, *Alias Grace* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. I noticed most were written by a character's adult perspective, stepping back into their child character, so seeing the world through both adult and child's eyes. *The Catcher in the Rye* doesn't do this, although Holden is a teenager, not a baby in his mother's womb.

I wanted my novel to be first person and present tense; that is, I wanted the action to appear to be happening at that moment. Much of the later sections of the novel (which are not being submitted for examination) are about Rose looking back on her childhood, and how the events of that time influenced her as an adult. So it was important for me to keep the first section, which is Rose's childhood, as present tense. For it wasn't yet meant to be a reflection on the past from some future position. That happens when Rose is an adult. So, whilst these novels were useful to read in terms of voice, none of them were written from a child's point of view at such a young age. Most have the benefit of hindsight and an adult perspective to help with that delivery.

Once again it was Atkinson's book that I found helpful in looking at voice. Her skill, I believe, was establishing a voice that was humorous from the very first line of the novel, 'I exist! I am conceived to the chimes of midnight on the clock on the mantelpiece in the room across the hall.'<sup>1</sup> This sets up an immediate playful tone that draws the reader in with the intriguing idea that an individual can be aware of their conception. It is the use of present tense in Ruby's story that helps give the idea that we, the reader, are experiencing the story at the same time as she, that is, without hindsight. Even Holden tells us his story from a future perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> Atkinson 1995 p 9



Initially I tried to imitate this humorous voice, tried to find a laconic Australian voice to place my story in. But it proved to be very difficult. Even though Ruby, in Atkinson's book, suffers terribly from a childhood incident that she doesn't remember until she is an adult, her suffering is delivered to us with such humour and delight that we don't get bogged down in it. I found that a very difficult thing to imitate. And as a first time writer, I realised I had possibly taken on too much trying to achieve this.

My supervisor suggested that I begin the novel in third person, and then return to Rose's first person perspective when she is a little older (which I decided to be nine years old). This made a huge difference to how the novel began, as I was able to put the necessary adult perspective on a scene through the eyes of Rose. I didn't want the entire novel to be third person, however, as this was Rose's story. When I slip back into Rose's past and tell the stories of her mother and grandmother, I do so in third person, past tense, and this appears in Part Two of what is now a four part novel. This style is set up in Part One on pages 32 – 51, when Leale begins to tell Rose some of the stories of the family, as they are packing to head south the coast house.

Concerned that my structure was going to be too much like Atkinson's, I began to look at other novels that dealt with a similar family theme following three generations of the one family from the past and present. Among them was Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Again, I tried to implement the structure of that novel onto my own. Smith's book gave me the idea of headings that pinpointed a time in history and a place. So that, in my book, one heading was *Bondi 1990*, where Rose is 27 years old and an event occurs, one that leads on from a previous section of her story. Then another heading would read *Bondi 1933*, where Rose's grandfather is teaching his children (i.e. Rose's mother and aunts and uncles) how to swim.

Carol Shields' work *The Stone Diaries* follows a woman from her birth to old age in a nursing home and death. It is written in third person, past tense, but its format was something I was initially influenced by. Again with the use of headings such as *Birth, 1963*, or *Love, 1984*, or *Loss, 1993*, etc.

However, submitting a large section of my novel in this structure for my Novel Writing class, showed me that it wasn't working. The teacher thought it was too confusing for the reader to jump back and forth in time, following so many characters. As I went into supervision, my first supervisor suggested putting all of the 'past' stories together as well as all of Rose's stories together, chronologically, so I could see what was missing or needed expanding. It was during this task that I worked out my eventual structure, as I realised the 'past' stories worked much better together. I also found the story that now forms Part One of *The Elastic House*, which I have submitted here. Having done that, I was then able to look at the trajectory of Rose's story and see what was superfluous and what needed looking at. Once again, doing this made me realise the novel needed to be in parts.

Part One is Rose's childhood. Part Two contains most the stories from the past, indicated at the end of Part One that they are told to Rose by her mother, Leale. Part Three is Rose as a young adult, trying to be independent of her family, but still drawn back each summer to the family's coast house and her past. And Part Four is Rose as a mother, who takes her own children back to the house where she has left so much of her own childhood. It is in this last part that the idea of the coast house as a metaphor for large families becomes clear, and where it is apparent that Rose won't be free of her past, and the hold her family has on her, until the coast house is gone.

Jeffrey Eugenides' novel, *Middlesex*, was a book I chose to read only after I completed my own novel. For I knew that it was a story that followed three generations of a family from the 1920s to the present day, just as mine is. I was

worried I would be too influenced by its structure, as I had by the other novels of a similar theme of family and generations. It turns out I have done exactly as Eugenides has done, and divided my novel into four parts.

The beauty of a four-part structure is that the writer can jump large sections of narrative time without fear they will lose their reader. By giving a novel sections such as Book Two, or Part Two, or, as Atkinson does, in Chapters and Footnotes 1 and Footnote 11 etc, the writer can indicate to the reader that this new section doesn't necessarily follow immediately from the other. That it can be a past or future event. Using this structure for my novel allowed me to jump from Rose's formative childhood, back to the past of Rose's parents' lives, then to revisit Rose as a young adult. It meant I could cut out large sections of narrative time that were doing little for the story.

The hardest part of writing this novel has been to step back from its origins. I decided to try and find something in Rose that was unique and went some way in explaining why she gets bogged down by the memories of her family. As I had been interviewing my aunts and uncles and my mother about their lives, before I was born, I realised I was keeping their stories. Although a keeper of stories wasn't going to be enough, I needed to find some other trait that made Rose take on other people's memories.

Around this time I read Mark Haddon's novel, *The Curious Incident Of the Dog in the Night-Time*, about a fifteen year old boy with Asperger's Syndrome, which is a form of autism where the child can't empathise with anyone. This made me think of the opposite, of an overly sensitive child, one who had a heightened sense of empathy, who hears and feels everything around her. I did some research, just to make sure that by going down this track with Rose, I wasn't also writing about autism, and in my study I found the symptoms of oversensitive hearing. So I

borrowed that symptom only, and decided not to make Rose autistic, just sensitive. By adding the hearing ability to Rose's already overly sensitive nature, I hoped it would give her character a reason to be the one child in this large extended family who takes it all in. I wanted Rose to hear and feel everything around her, and that it was her belief that this 'gift' was given to her so that she would collect her family's stories, but not just stories, also pain. I wanted Rose to keep people's pain and sorrow inside her as a testament to that moment, so that it was never lost. Added to this is Rose's refusal to speak till she is older. As she hears and sees so much, takes in so much, speaking out loud isn't something she wants to do, as to her mind, the world is noisy enough as it is.

Having Rose with this so called, 'gift', gave the four parts of my novel more focus as well. For each scenario is always linked back to the idea of a child who hears and sees too much, who takes everything in and feels the pain of others sometimes more than they do themselves. Even in Part Two, which has the stories of the past generations, there are references to indicate that this over-sensitivity is genetic. That Rose's grandfather and two of her uncles are also afflicted by it. They cope far worse than Rose however, and this was important to set this up in Part Two, for as we leave Rose in Part One, we know her 'gift' has almost killed her. So by seeing the effect it had on her uncles and grandfather, the reader will be intrigued to see how Rose copes as an adult. This helped me write Part Three and Four, which is leading up to Rose finding a way of dealing with this burden, without hibernating from the world.

The novel finishes with the house being sold, demolished and replaced by something new, large and incongruous to the surroundings. The sale and demolition of the house is the beginning of Rose's freedom. The stories stored inside the house have sunk into the clay soil of the land surrounding the beach. The stories stored inside Rose are purged in a paining frenzy, as Rose finds another place to store the memories of her family, and so freeing herself from the past.

I found I couldn't write a novel about a family's connection to a place, the land and sea and sand around the house, and the stories of that family, without acknowledging Indigenous Australia. My uncle told me the story of the black bareback riders, which I have put at the beginning of Part One. It was this story that made me think of what had been in that area, on the NSW south coast, before it was a dairy farm and before we built our house there. Another influence was a seminar I went to a few years ago at UTS, on Fictionalising History. It made me think that another layer had to be added to my book. Kate Grenville was at that seminar and she was working on her novel, which has just been released. She commented, then, that most white writers, painters and artists were finding they could no longer ignore their role in Australia's past. And I felt very strongly that I needed to address that idea in my novel.

It is secondary to the main narrative of Rose and her family's stories, but her connection to the house, the land, and the memories that are stored there, reference, perhaps as a subtext, the idea of songlines. And whilst Part One only touches on this, with the bareback riders and the young Aboriginal surfer who mentions his mother and brother have only recently found each other, the other parts of the novel have more references to Indigenous Australia and our past.

Rose's adult friend, Toby (who is in Part Three and Four) is an Aboriginal young man she meets at art school. It is through their friendship that I have been able to explore the themes of Australia's past history, the black and white connection to land, and of course, the sea, and to touch on reconciliation at the closing of the novel.

I am very aware that these are delicate issues, and am writing from a white person's perspective, not a black person's, but as I said, it seemed impossible to me to write this story, about a family's connection to a special place, without

acknowledging what came before. And I feel that the book as a whole, although probably not evident in Part One, does this justice.

Susan Thwaites

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